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THE ROLE OF THE READING TEACHER IN THE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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This paper has been written to set forth some of the functions of the reading teacher at the junior high level. There are many demands which such a teacher must meet. Some of these are of a predictable nature and can be dealt with in a prescribed manner. Other functions are more difficult to predetermine because much depends upon the students who are involved in the reading program. The size of the classes is intended to be very small, numbering not more than five students per class. It is expected that the students selected for participation in the reading program would be those who have the ability to learn but are much below grade level in reading.

Reading is a complex process. It cannot be extracted or isolated as a separate part of an individual. The ability to read is integrated with the whole individual. His personality, environment, experiences, health, economic status, and self-image are all factors. To be effective at the junior high level, a reading program must encompass a broad spectrum related to the individual and must reach out in many directions. In a remedial reading program attention needs to be given to the reasons for failure in reading, and these need to be dealt with at the same time as the actual reading problem.

Factors Affecting Reading Performance

Reading instruction should center around the student and his needs and problems. If this is to be done, the teacher must begin by making an appraisal of the child. A beginning point is the investigation of physical factors which have interfered with or delayed achievement in reading.

For most children the refinement of the ability to see clearly is a developmental task accomplished without an actual awareness of its occurrence on the part of the individual. However, some children do not achieve this refinement, and are often unaware of it. One who has never had the experience of seeing objects clearly does not have a way of knowing that a person can have visual acuity which is any better than his own. Early diagnosis and correction of visual difficulties are important. Schools try periodically to check the changing vision of children, but it is the duty of the parents to follow through on any

recommendations made by the schools. Parents do not always take the necessary action. This is usually due to economic reasons, neglect, or vanity on the part of the child. If visual defects are not corrected, a reading problem can result. Untreated poor vision also reflects itself in undesirable personality changes. An individual does not respond correctly to the expression of a blurred face. He is likely to miss social clues which a person would ordinarily notice. A child who lacks depth perception will be sometimes considered dull or clumsy because he cannot judge a ball coming at him. Uncomplimentary attitudes of others can result in a poor self-image. The teacher of reading in the junior high school should investigate health records to see what action has been taken in the past. If there has been no recent eye examination, arrangements should be made. The school nurse or other qualified person could conduct preliminary examinations for all such reading students. If vision is at fault, concentrated reading instruction will not be of benefit until the physical difficulty has been improved. The reading teacher must become personally concerned and see that suitable measures are taken where vision is discovered to be defective. Even the economic barrier can be hurdled for some students through the school and local agencies.

Faulty hearing can have a detrimental effect upon reading. The child does not hear correct pronunciation because he may not hear some sounds at all. Here again, early detection of a hearing difficulty offers the best solution for the child. Many schools, with the aid of the Constance Brown Society, periodically check the hearing of students. The reading teacher should be aware of these tests and any significant data recorded concerning reading students. Since childhood illnesses can result in a hearing loss, it usually cannot be determined by checking records whether a hearing loss has occurred since the most recent hearing test recorded. If it is possible, the best procedure would be to arrange hearing tests for all reading students. If this is an impossibility, the reading teacher can sometimes make discoveries through careful observations of the child. The student might turn his head to the side to favor the better ear, or he might listen with a tense facial expression. While inattention and the ignoring of clear directions may be symptoms of other things, these can also indicate a hearing loss. The teacher might also use an informal whisper test. Seated across the room from the teacher, an unimpaired student should be able to write down, along with other students, words which the teacher speaks in a soft whisper. The teacher might experiment with both volume and pitch of voice sounds.

Speech difficulties, which result from many causes, can contribute to difficulty in reading. Confusion occurs when a child does not interpret what he sees and hears into correct speech sounds. Severe speech difficulties should be referred to a speech therapist. A well-meaning but untrained person can compound a student's difficulty by inappropriate activities. In some cases such as speech habits and pronunciation related to cultural speech patterns the reading teacher might successfully improve speech and reading skills at the same time.

The senses are the most obvious physical factors to be investigated in reading students, but there are other health problems which could contribute to reading difficulties. Anything from malnutrition to glandular irregularities could sufficiently interfere with energy and drive so as to create a severe problem over a period of time. The difficulty in reading can be further complicated by discouragement and disinterest. Physical difficulties should be treated before the student is expected to make progress in reading. More should be done to benefit students who need this kind of help. The most severe cases usually do receive some attention from schools, or privately, but the physical problems of many students go unattended. It could be arranged for the same school physician who checks students for the physical education programs to give reading students a more thorough check-up and arrange for the necessary follow-through to help eliminate this source as a causal factor in reading difficulty.

Emotional factors are responsible for many of the deviations in personality development which affect reading. The reading teacher can sometimes help some of the conditions, but there are types of disturbances which the teacher should recognize as needing more specialized help than he should attempt to give. Extremes of anxiety, excessive feelings of guilt, sadistic fantasies or efforts to suppress them are found in disabled readers. Students showing these tendencies should be referred to someone who can give them the kind of help they need. In many cases emotional difficulties must be solved before help in reading will be of benefit to the individual.

A child's self-concept is a factor in a reading problem. If a child sees himself as someone who is inferior to others, he is not able to recognize his own assets. The reading teacher should try to understand the part which reading plays in this image which the child holds. The teacher also needs to know what the child thinks of himself as a reader and what reading success means to him. The attitude of the reading teacher is important. Understanding and sensitivity must be shown if the student is to make changes in behavior or attitudes toward

himself and reading.

As the reading teacher studies the background of the student, he should investigate the environment from which the student comes. The surroundings in which a student lives has much influence over the attitudes of the student toward himself, his attitude toward learning and his ideas of what the future might have to offer him. In an environment where reading is not valued as a means of communication, the child will be influenced to feel the same way. If education is not considered an asset, the child will reflect this thinking. If books and magazines are not a part of the home environment, the child will usually grow up without the reading habit.

Closely tied to the environmental factors is the economic status of the family. The child from a low income family will grow up in a culturally deprived situation. This is reflected in an absence of ideas and experiences upon which much educational growth depends. Even if the parents show positive attitudes toward education, they will not be able to provide for the child in the same manner as those who are financially more able. However, it should be noted that cultural deprivation is not always limited to low income groups. Even though the economic factor is not a problem, the attitude of the parents greatly influences the quality of incidental and planned experiences of the child. If parents in this group do not promote the values of education and reading, the children are not likely to see the need for learning or understand the pleasures to be gained from reading.

The whole area of family relationships can have an effect on the educational development of the child. The attitude of the parents toward the child, toward each other, or toward other siblings in the family can be reflected in what the child is, what he does, and how he sees himself in relation to others. While the environment, economic status of the family, and family patterns are factors which the reading teacher cannot alter, they should be a part of his working knowledge of the student. Such information will aid the teacher in a better understanding of learning difficulties.

While it is usually considered dangerous to generalize, there are some traits which poor readers are prone to exhibit. It is wise for the reading teacher to be aware of them. The inferior reader is likely to display some extremes of personality such as aggression or complete lack of it, concealed aggression, inferiority, or extremes of fear or anger. For example, a poor reader may be one who withdraws from social contacts. He may prefer to be by himself or to lead a rather inactive life. Loneliness may be preferable to the risk of failure in an

active situation. If he is unable to be alone, he may try to escape his surroundings by daydreaming. He may be inattentive and lack persistence when confronted with a task to accomplish. A poor reader may be timid and bashful and show an unusual lack of poise, or he might be stubborn and tend to throw tantrums when frustrated. Sometimes a student with reading difficulties shows an inability to get along with others.

Methods of Studying the Student

The reading teacher must make use of several ways of finding out about students. Most obvious is the cumulative record. This teacher can discover much from records of health, past performance, anecdotal record, records of testing, and pertinent family information. More current information might be obtained by consulting the school nurse, teachers, counselor, or specialists who have worked with the child. A personal interview with the parents, if it could be arranged, would be very helpful to the teacher in further understanding the child. Further information might be obtained from an autobiography written by the student.

The reading teacher will need to add to the accumulated information the results of tests which have been administered for specific reasons. Some types of test results would be already available from past records, and these tests need not be repeated by the reading teacher. Usually included are group measures of mental ability, achievement tests, and occasionally personality tests. Other tests which the reading teacher should give would include a general test of reading and a diagnostic reading test. Tests of this nature would yield the present reading status and specific reading needs of the individual. An interest test might be added, if needed, to discover student interests. If the teacher is qualified to give it, an individual intelligence test which yields both verbal and non-verbal performance scores could be added to the survey of tests. A projective test is another type which might be helpful in some cases. Testing should be done in a selective manner. All students do not need to be given all tests that the teacher knows how to administer. Testing should be for a purpose.

One of the best ways of finding out about a child is to observe him. As he reacts to the various situations in which he finds himself, the teacher can discover much about the child. The teacher can learn how the student feels about himself and those with whom he associates. How they feel about him is often revealed. Attitudes toward school, class work, and reading can be discovered in this way. Some reading difficulties can also be determined. As he works with his reading

teacher, the student reveals such things as the types of words with which he has difficulty, word attack skills, the extent of his vocabulary, his degree of fluency in reading, and left to right orientation. The teacher can tell whether the student can read for meaning, understand an author's organization of material, find various sources of material, and organize thoughts and ideas. While watching students read silently, the teacher can note the rate of reading, attention span, frowning, lip movements, or fingerpointing. A student's casual comments often reveal his interests, home conditions, and attitude toward reading.

The Junior High Reading Program

The core of an effective reading program is the individual student and his needs. The purpose of the careful investigation by the reading teacher is to become thoroughly acquainted with all aspects of the child. This information can then be used in working skillfully with the child in learning situations. It is only as the teacher of reading uses all that he knows about each student in helping to construct satisfying learning experiences that progress in reading will come about.

With the results of the preliminary appraisal clearly in mind, the reading teacher should begin to individualize the reading program for each child. Students who reach the junior high level suffering from reading difficulties have developed a strong resistance to reading, especially that which is imposed upon them. Reading is not pleasurable because to them it is both uninteresting and too difficult. In a remedial reading program much emphasis should be placed on how to interest the child in improving his reading. The methods used in the past obviously failed. More skills as such will not change the problem. The child needs to be involved in reading in a different manner. One solution is individualized reading experiences which begin at the level of the student and capitalize on his interests and the positive aspects of his personality.

Individualized reading does not "start with procedures, but with a creative teacher—one who believes children want to learn; who thinks with children rather than for them; who basically respects the individual behavior of every youngster; who works with children in orderly ways." There is no one method with rigid steps to be followed. It is a general approach which permits many variations. This type of reading ceases when "procedure replaces perceptiveness; routine supersedes reflection; things take over for thinking; custom curbs creativity."

A basic part of an individualized program is the self-selection of books. A poor reader will not improve greatly unless the material he is asked to read is of interest to him and has some meaning for him.

A teacher cannot force a child to enjoy something he does not want. One of the main purposes for learning to read is for pleasure and satisfaction. Even reluctant readers can learn to like reading better when they choose their own books. A reading teacher must use the information compiled about the child in acquiring appropriate materials for his use. Within the classroom the teacher should have several books per child from which each may make selections. The available library facilities should be used often.

The teacher must use every means possible to discover the reading interests of the students with whom he is working. A student's interest brings with it a readiness. It opens a closed mind and elevates motivation. By the time a reluctant reader reaches the junior high level he has had much reading material pushed at him which he has rejected. Sometimes this process of rejection is fixed as a habit. This barrier is not an easy one to overcome, but it must be lifted.

The interest of students is selective. There are certain types of books which junior high students often prefer. For example, boys like adventure, sports, mysteries, animal stories, science, biographies, stories centering around cars, and how-to-do-it books. Girls like books about teenage girls and their problems, family life, school stories, boy-girl relationships, and biographies. However, these should not be the only types of materials available. Even a joke book can help a teacher make a beginning in building up a desire to read.

The teacher's own attitude toward books and reading must be pleasurable if he is really going to influence children to enjoy reading. He must reflect a love of reading and the satisfactions that reading can bring to an individual. The teacher must be able to share this kind of feeling in a very subtle way so that students are not consciously aware of the reasons behind these actions.

Interest and pleasure in reading material aid in memory and comprehension. The reason is simple: the individual has a desire and a need to know. It also follows that reading material closely related to the individual's experiential background will be easier for him to read. Because he has something upon which to build, he is more likely to remember longer that which he reads. There is real satisfaction for the student to be found in better understanding of that which he reads.

Children need to learn how to choose materials which are both challenging and satisfying, and they need a chance to practice doing this. Children learn best by doing. They need to be involved in a gradual pattern of growth. As they try out books, they learn to make

judgments about what is best to read at a given time. Not all books selected by the child will be read from cover to cover. Some books are not intended to be used that way. Other books may contain only sections which will hold the child's interest for any length of time. The teacher can work to extend gradually the interests and reading experiences of the child.

The teacher needs to help each child develop his own purposes for reading. These purposes should be of genuine interest to him. Purposeful reading leads to a better understanding of the reading material, and a greater degree of enjoyment.

The pace of an individualized program is that which a child sets for himself. He may go as fast or as slowly as his needs permit. The student is in competition with no one but himself. The prospect of frustration and tension over trying to assume the speed of someone else is removed. With this block taken away, reading is allowed to fit more comfortably into the educational growth pattern of each child. Successful reading experience is the goal of the reading teacher.

Individualized reading is not a "soft, unstructured, unplanned use of time and materials." It is not a casual or impulsive program which flows out aimlessly in any direction. As a child demonstrates weaknesses in skills, these should be strengthened. The teacher must have a good background in the skills of reading so that he can intelligently observe the child and make decisions about his needs. The results of any standardized tests which were given would also be useful at this point. Each child should work on his own difficulties as they become apparent to the teacher. This means that all children in the same instructional group will not be involved with the same skill at the same time using the same materials. That which is good for one, is not necessarily good for all. Even if several students in the same class share the same reading problem, different materials might be used for each child depending upon interests and level of ability of each.

In individualizing a program the reading teacher must spend a portion of time on a planned basis with each student. This is a time when the student has the teacher's undivided attention. A situation such as this presents the teacher with an excellent opportunity to develop rapport with the child. An understanding relationship is especially important in reading. A child can be made to feel that someone is truly interested in him and what he is doing. Some of the tensions of learning can be erased if the student feels at ease and is able to discuss his problems more freely. The child can learn to recognize his own needs.

During conference sessions the reading teacher can do much to improve the self-confidence and security of the child. Sincere praise and commendation should be given often. Students who have seldom felt the pleasure of reassurance experience a lift of motivation and put forth renewed efforts. It should be noted that students recognize praise without sincerity as empty, and they do not receive satisfaction from praise which they feel is undeserved.

Both the teacher and the student have responsibilities in the reading conference. The child may have specific questions about a word, a meaning, or a concept in his reading. Student questions and comments often can provide leads as to the course a conference should take. Other times the teacher might choose a specific purpose. At different times the teacher could use the time to discover such things as the word attack methods used by the student, or the use of context clues. General and specific questions might be asked related to the child's current reading. The teacher could find out how the child interprets main ideas or important details of an episode. This is the time when a teacher may listen to the child as he reads to gain further understanding of his problems. As the teacher listens to the child read privately, no one else needs to be aware of the particular difficulties experienced unless the child himself wishes to share them later.

The conference time also could be used to evaluate together the progress of the child in any skill development or work which he is undertaking. Plans can be made for further reading and activities. Plans which are made cooperatively will come closer to fulfilling the needs of students than plans which are entirely teacher-made. As a student becomes involved in the process of planning his own schedule of activities, he is better able to understand his reading difficulties. It is only when a child recognizes that he has a problem and is willing to work on it that real progress can be made.

At the junior high level some of the planning in the conference should include the problems of reading in the content areas. The types of skills needed in subjects where the student is particularly weak should become a part of his activities. The improvement of these skills is an important consideration. As a student feels himself making gains in his classes he becomes a more enthusiastic reader. His self-image is also improved by successes in other classes which have been made through better reading habits. The reading teacher should check closely at various conference times to see that skills once established are maintained by the student.

There are times in a small reading class when the group might benefit from the cooperative selection of a topic which all members in the group find of interest. With the help of the teacher, each student would choose materials at his level which follow his interests. This kind of activity would give each child an opportunity to contribute something of his reading to a topical discussion. Each could learn the satisfactions of successful group participation. If the group is too diversified for common agreement on a topic, the teacher can still provide audience situations for students by using as a basis any books or reading material which students wish to share with each other. This provides a time to show the pleasures of reading and also reading accomplishments. The general sharing of information adds to their own knowledge. Children can often interest each other in books through their own recommendations.

Individualized reading should lead the student to a functional use of reading skills. Work should be directed toward a better understanding of ideas and information and the ability to put them to use. Students also need to acquire the ability to think critically and solve problems. The development of their own points of view and ideals is an important reading goal. As reading skills develop, so should the ability to evaluate themselves realistically. Through reading they should gain a better understanding of themselves and others. They should have a broadened view of the culture in which they live.

Adequate records need to be kept of each child and his accomplishments. These should include an orderly account of the pertinent information which the teacher will accumulate in making the appraisal of the child as discussed previously. Any communications between the teacher and parents or other faculty members regarding the child should become a part of this file. An anecdotal record or diary written by the reading teacher might be helpful in noting progress. Samples of the student's writing which reveal insights of noteworthy accomplishments might be saved. The results of evaluations and some conferences might be notes to offer guidance in future planning. Records should indicate how the child is functioning in reading and the continuity of experiences. Above all the records kept should be of value to the teacher in working with the child. They should not become so complicated and involved that the teacher feels smothered by them.

Continuous evaluations should be carried out by the reading teacher. This lends focus to the reading program. Evaluation should be in the light of each student, what he is, and what accomplishments have been set as goals. That which seems to gain desired results should

be kept in practice for a given individual. Anything which seems to be losing its effect should be changed. Some evaluations will take the form of observations. These observations might include some made by the teachers who have the reading students in regular classroom situations. If the student can show gains in another subject which involves reading, the teacher can be reasonably sure that the individual is benefiting from the reading program.

The changes in habits and attitudes of the reading student can also be used in the process of evaluation. A higher level of interest in reading is a positive indication. Signs of increased self-confidence and the ability to work more independently are good manifestations of progress. Communications from parents sometimes show that the student has made changes which are significant enough to make an impact upon them.

Another source for evaluation is the student's work folder. Not only his pencil and paper work should be counted. His reading record should also be important. If the student is reading books and enjoying the process, he has made gains in reading.

If the teacher needs to make a more objective appraisal of progress, standardized tests should be used for comparison with earlier scores. For these purposes any test given should be a different form of the one with which it is to be compared. It should be kept in mind that tests of this nature can only measure certain types of gains. It is also true that some students react emotionally to test situations so that the results of the tests for some may not indicate the real changes which have taken place.

To fulfill the many requirements of the role of a reading teacher, careful plans must be made to attend to the details of carrying out an effective program. Both long range planning and daily planning need to be worked out to meet the needs of students. The teacher must set aside time for the necessary record keeping. Background information from cumulative records should be obtained at the beginning of the school year before the teacher meets with the students for the first time, if possible. There must be time for any necessary consultation with other staff members as the need arises. If parent conferences are to be a part of the program, these too must be planned. The selection of materials should not be left to chance opportunities. Each individual needs careful guidance, and the teacher should have time for necessary preparations. Much of the planning will center around the provisions for individual reading conferences between the student and the teacher, the development of reading skills needed, group discussions,

and the sharing of stories.

It should be expected that difficulties will develop. An individualized reading program does not offer the complete solution to every type of problem which the reading teacher will encounter. It does, however, provide a way of working with students to which reluctant readers usually respond.

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